CORPUS of the MOSAICS of ALBANIA

Volume 1

Butrint *intramuros*

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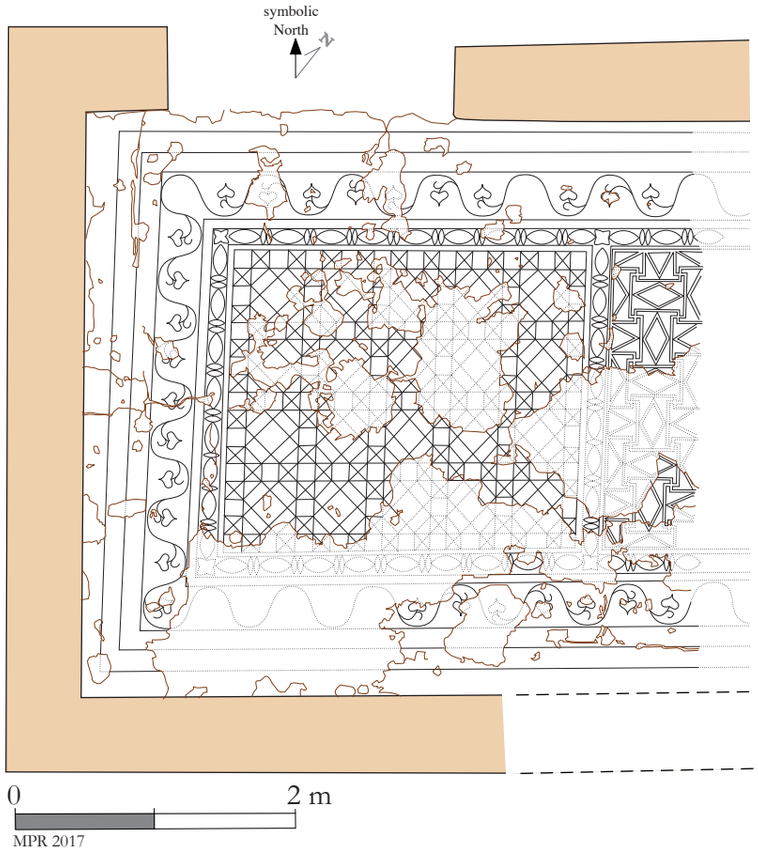
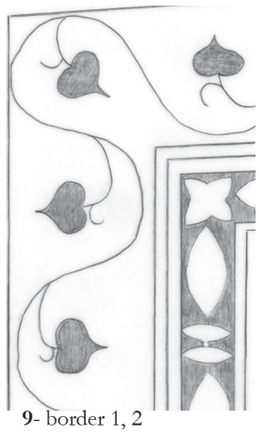
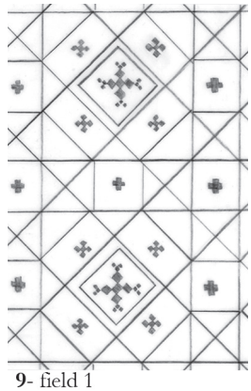


52. Graphic reconstruction of the mosaic according to the previous drawing.



9- border 1, 2



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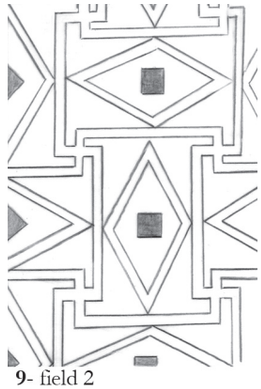


9- field 2

no. **5**, Baths under the Great Basilica nos. **3-4**, and possibly the Baths near the Vivari Channel no. **6** since the latter has a similar field grid,[89] if relatively rare (*Field 2*). The border of vertical and horizontal spindles resembles those of mosaics **3** and **5**. The ivy leaf motif (*hederae*) is akin to that of gallery of the Triconch complex no. **11**, but is even more similar to that of the mosaic O at Vrina, Town House 2. The repertoire is the same, as well as the overall arrangement with outer margins in successive bands of pink and white. A taste is seen for linear and repeating pattern, covering the floor with an outlined network of double filets. The field patterns are very fragmented, and difficult to discern at first glance.

10. Mural mosaics in the three niches of the Nymphaion, by E. Neri

Illustrations 43, 53-61, 237-239, 290-300, 315

Parietal *opus tessellatum in situ*

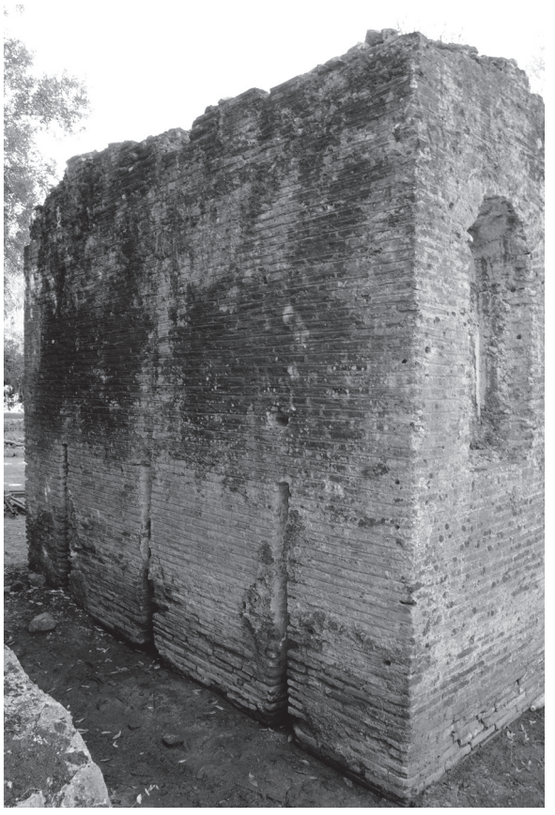
Architecture: a small rectangular building (9.30 x 5.00 m), brick-built with narrow joins (*opus testaceum*), encloses a rectangular basin with an apse. The west and eastern ends are elevated, forming a frame that emphasizes this central structure of the courtyard (fig. 53). We will call it a Nymphaion, the term 'fountain' suggesting more an edifice for public use, for the distribution of water (running water and overflow). Here, by contrast, access to the water seems difficult, and we have found no specific place for the filling of receptacles. The ornamental building seems therefore most likely to have been designed for aesthetic or religious purposes, as demonstrated in the mosaic iconography.

After the destruction by the Italian excavators of a small chapel within the Nympheum (cf. infra synthesis, chap. 7), the complex was subsequently restored and rebuilt. Only a few remnants remain allowing us to attempt to piece together the original setting.

89. The same design is studied under number 122, Guimier-Sorbets 1983, pp. 197-199, pl. CXXIV-CXXV. The most numerous examples date from the 2nd to the 3rd c. An example is found in the lateral fields of mosaic J of Town House at Vrina (fig. 212).

53. Gymnasium, Nympheum; wall mosaics **10**; overall view of the mosaic niches in the apse.

54. View of the south side of the apse, with flat niches.



55. View of the rear of the apse, with grooves and piercing for the water inlet.

The eastern section, preserved higher up, is rectangular on the outside (5.00 x 1.76 m). On the external wall are shallow, flat-based niches (width 78 cm) in the upper halves of the north and south faces (traces of pink mortar) (fig. 54). This inside of this end of the bath is built in a semi-circle creating an apse. Three semi-domed niches sit high up in the concave facade of the apse. They communicate with the outside via three conduits passing through the wall. At the back of the apse, and connected to these pipes, three vertical grooves seem to indicate a water drainage pipe (fig. 55) (for that originally contained lead pipes, now lost or re-used elsewhere). The water supply probably came from a cistern linked to the new aqueduct. At the foot of the east wall, under the pipes, is a large gutter, which then proceeds westward, crossing the northern section of the courtyard under its floor. This installation resembles very much that seen in the Nymphaion of the Tower Gate near the Great Basilica, where sculptures were found during the digs. The two structures do seem to be contemporary.

In front of the apse is a wide semi-circular step descending towards the rectangular basin.

The west side of the basin, preserved at 1.20 m only, reflected the other shorter side, also with flat-based niches on its north and south facades (for sculptures or reliefs?) as shown in the old archival photos and plans. The inner facade is quadrangular, and not apse-shaped like its counterpart. The outer face of the west wall forms a narrow corridor with the wall surrounding the courtyard. Numerous remains of a thick hydraulic mortar rich in broken tile are still visible, demonstrating a phase of usage of the space in a hydraulic context. First of all, this little space was sealed by two narrow partitions (forming a small cistern?), and was slightly retracted in relation to the extension of the basin walls, these partitions being, we see, coated in a veneer of marble, like all of the Nymphaion elevation. Then the north and south partitions of this closed space were levelled to create a corridor via a slab paved floor linking the two sections of the courtyard. Finally, the wall of the courtyard in this area carries the clear imprints and remnants of a marble veneer.

The complex of the Nymphaion elevation was therefore covered in a marble veneer: interior and exterior of the walls shows remains of it or of the scratch coat mortar layer underneath, very noticeable at the time of the discovery. Inside the apse, the holes from the clamps and the remains of the bronze pins, together with the imprints left on the *cocciopesto* mortar (density 3.5-6 cm), allow us to suppose that the decorative scheme followed the architecture: a marble socle, of which a few traces are still visible on the external wall of the Nymphaion, was surmounted by a marble veneer up to the level of the niches and the water inlets, with a horizontal marble listel. The marble veneer coated the whole of the vertical wall between the niches and the inside of the niches except the semi-domes; it probably enhanced the brick arcatures surmounting the semi-domes thanks to an arched marble border, whose numerous fastening pins can still be seen. The two large circular holes each side of the northern niche probably correspond to the development of an iconostasis during the medieval use of the building as a church.

The coping of the basin was perhaps levelled when the later church was built or during its disassembly by the excavators. The bottom of the basin is currently located at about 30 cm under the floor level of the court (see levels). According to a plan carried out during the excavations, the original basin edges must have been flanked by an external step.

The veneers having disappeared, today the brick construction technique of the Nymphaion is visible. The niches were accentuated by a brick arch placed at the same level as the wall, with marble veneer imprints visible especially in the right niche. Only the part in the semi-domes of the niches was covered in wall mosaics, with stone tesserae and some decorative motifs in glass.

Dimensions

Dim. niches: h. 152 cm, width 78 cm.

Max. height of apse elevation from the foot of the wall: 4.08 m. Apse wall: 65 to 69 cm thick. The niches are separated from each other by 46 to 46.5 cm. Depth of the niches: 37 cm (central niche) to 45/48 cm. Opening in the niches to receive a water pipe: rectangular hole, (left side, height 12 cm by 16 cm, length of the pipe: 67 cm; in the centre: 14 cm by 17 cm, length of the pipe in the wall, 24 cm; right side, hole 11 cm by 18 cm, length of pipe 56 cm).

Materials, colours, paint on the tesserae: stones (red, pink, black and white), glass (blue, green, brown) and terracotta (red); painted stone. The tesserae are quite large, the whole designed to be seen from far away and from below.

We notice the poly-materiality of the composition with stone tesserae, others in glass, and a stone layer painted black or grey. Painting the mosaic is a technique of Hellenistic origin, designed to give the composition a pictorial impression, and playing at the same time on the different reflections

56. Central niche, with paint above the tesserae.

of the materials.[90] Examples of painted tesserae of the Imperial Age are much rarer: used also in nymphaion mosaics,[91] they are not employed across the whole pattern, but are limited, as in the mosaic of the Nymphaion at Butrint, to particular areas (fig. 56), in order to create artificial nuances and effects of shadow and volume. We do not know what binder was used as a fixative that allowed it to survive in a damp environment.

Density: the density by dm^2 is 72 tesserae in the lateral niches and 84 in the mask of the central niche.

Support: from a technical point of view, the mosaic is created on a preparatory layer of hydraulic lime-base mortar with aggregates of quartz and pounded brick on which rests a lime-rich bedding layer, almost without aggregates.

In the central niche, the lower layer has an orange preparatory paint for the mask (fig. 57a) and black for the ground (fig. 57b). This painting has no aesthetic value; it simply guides the design. It is indeed covered by the bedding layer of the tesserae whose joins are left white. In the side niches, the preparatory layers of the mosaic are unpainted: here the mosaicist probably worked freehand to create a simpler motif, positioned in the axis of the niche, with a layout of tesserae that is less contiguous and precise.

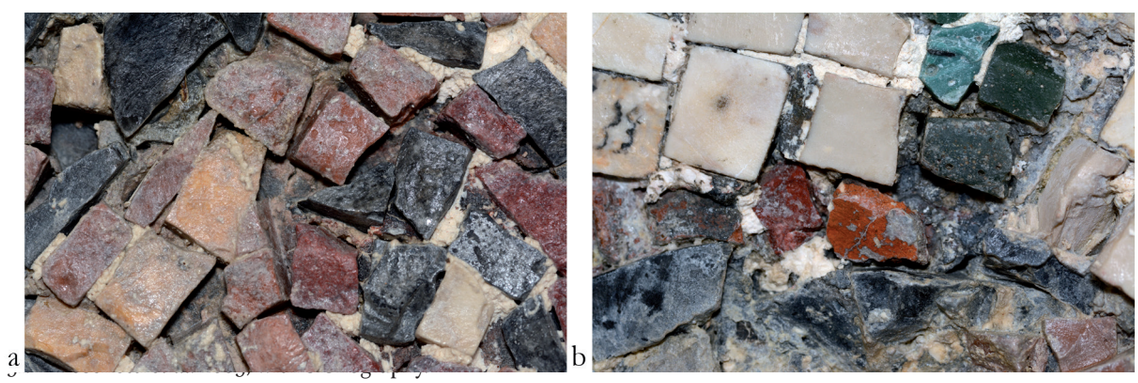
Early and modern restorations: when the Nymphaion was converted into a church, the mosaic was partly erased by the removal of glass tesserae and the obliteration of the image with black paint, then by a lime-rich coating which covered it completely. Several layers of painted coating, discovered during the restorations in the 1940s, indicate the church was uniformly whitewashed (cf. infra synthesis, chapt. 7).

In the 1940s, after Ugolini's excavations, the Nymphaion and the mosaics were restored, and the cracks visible in the archival photographs filled.

Apart from several conservation projects over the decades, a restoration campaign was carried out in 2012 by the IMK, and the site inspected the following year (fig. 58), in order to consolidate the parietal mosaics and attempt to reduce the veil of calcite shrouding the mosaics, which had been continually exposed to the sun and weathering.

Description

The wall mosaic appears solely on the three semi-domes of the Nymphaion niches. These are bordered by a strand of red serrated triangles – or saw-tooth pattern – (*Décor* I, pl. 10g), in stone, underlined inside by a black filet and a black dentilled simple filet (*Décor* I, pl. 2d). The fields are figured, on a ground of white stone tesserae. The central niche houses a mask, tilted and facing right – a bearded and ivy-crowned god, holding a (partially preserved) pointed baton (fig. 59). The character may be identified as Poseidon/Neptune by his beard or, more likely, to Dionysos/Bacchus by his ivy wreath. In the first case, the baton could be a trident, in the second a thyrsus. The figure is extremely impressionistic: the black stone tesserae



57. Paint under the mosaic, visible between the tesserae.

58. Conservators at work.

59. Central niche.

delineating the eyes, mouth and beard allow us to detect a human figure. The flesh tones are created with red and orange stone tesserae, and terracotta, which also frame the upper part of the mask (fig. 60). Beard and hair are rendered in grey painted cubes and grey stone tesserae, to obtain artificial nuances. The wreath is made entirely of gleaming green glass tesserae, which show surface damage owing to extraction attempts. The tip of the staff is in blue and light-blue glass tesserae. A thick layer of black paint is superimposed on the mosaic image, disfiguring it. We shall return in the synthesis (chapt. 7) to the meaning of this effacement, which probably occurred immediately prior to the conversion of the building into a church.

The two side niches are decorated with *kantharoi* or two-handled craters with racemes of vine shooting out. The grey vases are made with black glass tesserae which form the outline of the motif. Shadow and volume are suggested by the use of different nuances of grey stone and black-painted stone tesserae. The main branches of the vine scrolls, in red stone tesserae or terracotta, are arranged symmetrically to fill the spaces (fig. 61). The leaves are in three-tone green glass tesserae, their veins depicted in blue glass. They are in a poor state of preservation. The tesserae of the leaves have been deliberately removed to erase the image and/

60. Detail of Dionysos's head.

a

b

61. a) Left niche, b) Right niche.

or reclaim the glass, leaving lacunae which have been filled since Antiquity with a lime-rich mortar, before the mosaic's finally being obliterated by a late coating.

Interpretation and comparisons: the vine tendrils emerging from a crater or a kantharos here invite an identification of the central mask with Dionysos, to whom the Nymphaion near the Great Basilica is also dedicated, where two statues of Dionysos and Apollo adorned the niches.

The representation of bearded Dionysos is less common on mosaics, but iconographical studies suggest the beard may be a telling feature for identifying the god and could reveal a correlation with the ritual act, which is notably perceptible through the systematic association of the bearded portrait with the kantharos or the *oinochoe* that would synthesize the ritual act of libation. The theme of the miraculous potential of the vine goes back to ancient Greek art, but was revived by Hadrian and seems to depict the beneficent role of Dionysos who offered one its humanity's essential fruits.

The decorative scheme of nymphaia often borrows from *lararium-aediculae*. Nymphaia are distinguished from them solely by their hydraulic role, and because Dionysiac subjects and motifs of the sea come to the fore (their growing diffusion being noticeable in the decoration). Bacchus and his cortege represent, in particular, one of the major themes of statuary art in gardens and fountains. It is not uncommon either in public or ritual fountains, such as in the 'Gymnasium' at Butrint.

Images from the 1st century AD of Neptune, Dionysos and Venus reclining on the water in semi-arches or niches with parietal mosaics are well attested: the Fountain of the Casa dell'Orso at Pompei (VII-II, 45), that of Anzio (now housed at the National Museum in Rome), and the Dionysos panel at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples are the best-known examples (fig. 62). The mask and the kantharos are frequently depicted in fountain wall mosaics. Some of the oldest examples are at the Great Fountain of the House of the 'Fontana Grande' (VI-VIII, 22) at Pompei, where a *kantharos* with vine tendrils adorns the semi-dome, a mask of Neptune occupies the niche, and two sculpted masks embellish the pillars. Masks also feature in the decorative schemes at the Casa della Fontana Piccola and the Casa dell'Orso.

The inclining position of the central mask could be an allusion to the reclining pose of river deities or other personifications of the water and the flowing of water. This interpretation is corroborated by the presence of a grey band of painted tesserae to the right and below the mask, which could be the synthetic representation of a river.

It is not easy to find appropriate iconographic and stylistic parallels in the nymphaion mosaics contemporary to the building at Butrint and its decoration. Parietal mosaic decorations of the 2nd to 3rd centuries are extremely rare throughout the Empire, even though great baths complexes and baths of private residences continued to be decorated with mosaics with elaborate iconographic schemes. The most well-known examples are the Baths of Sette Sapienti in Ostia (2nd century), the Salamine Baths in Cyprus (3rd century), and the Hunting Baths at Leptis Magna (2nd-century). In the Balkans, the only known example of an Imperial wall mosaic is that of the Baths at Philippopolis, where only the sparse tesserae suggest what the wall decoration would have looked like. The rarity of this category of mosaics makes the mosaic at Butrint one of capital importance. And yet it is not mentioned in the major catalogues on mural mosaics.

From a stylistic point of view, the white grounds (common especially from the 2nd to 3rd century and very popular in Late Antiquity), together with the expressionistic style and colourful appearance, draw this mosaic close to certain African examples of the 3rd century: the mosaic at Sousse conserved at the Museum, with Dionysos unveiling Ariadne who is depicted in the stance of the nymph surprised (first half of 3rd century); the mosaic at Thuburbo Majus with an alcove scene showing Ariadne and Dionysos caressing one another; and the mosaic of Neptune at Oudna (3rd century). All of these show particular similarities in style with the niches of the 'Gymnasium'.

The mosaic therefore shows a coherent decorative scheme for the Roman 2nd and 3rd century Nymphaion, without any reworking or restoration, while in the literature we often find *kantharoi* attributed to the Paleochristian era.[92] This attribution rests on the presence of birds flanking the vases, which are often seen at Butrint, such as in the Christian redevelopment of the Well of *Giunia Rufina* near the Lion Gate, the mosaic panels of the Baptistery and Church of the *columbarium*, or in the borders of the Baptistery Annex. Yet the

92. Bowden & Mitchell 2004, p. 114 and Sebastiani 2007.

absence of birds or traces of birds in the mosaic of the Gymnasium niches and the mythological subject of the central niche serve to question this interpretation.

This rare example of a wall mosaic of the Imperial age with a Dionysiac subject, dated stylistically to the 2nd to 3rd century, seems well adapted for a nymphaion located near the *Asklepeion*.

It is not only the subject portrayed, but also the transformation of the building into a church, which underline the sacredness of the milieu and invite us to interpret the building as a nymphaion rather than as a simple fountain. The fact there is no water evacuation system points even closer to this understanding of the space, and the question arises again: what was the function of the building (so-called 'Gymnasium,') in which the Nymphaion is found? And the hypothesis is suggested again that this was a cult and/or therapeutic space, connected with the Sanctuary of Esculape (Asklepios).

Although the 'Gymnasium' is not taken into account in the latest research on the buildings linked to the Sanctuary,[93] it could have been part of the 2nd century restoration of the *Asklepeion*. Indeed, following the model of the *Asklepeion* at Pergamon, renovation programmes with the additions of baths, libraries and theatres are known at Epidaurus, Lebena, Kos – and this thanks to the support of private individuals, ordinary citizens. This private evergetism has been linked to the change in cult and the need to stay longer in the sanctuary.[94] Indeed, if the Peristyle Edifice near the Theatre is considered to be a hostel or House for the Priests, then a large structure is lacking in the *Asklepeion* at Butrint to accommodate the faithful, those accompanying the sick, and pilgrims. A building would be necessary if, as it is well documented by Aelius Aristides, worshippers had to sleep there for several days, awaiting the divinity's appearance through a dream. For it was in sacred dreams that he manifested himself, as we have seen, bidding ablutions to be made before prayer in the Sanctuary.[95]

93. Melfi 2007b.

94. Melfi 2007a.
95. Festugières 1986, partic. Aelius Aristide, *Hagioi Logoi*, ch. 79.

62. Dionysos and his thyrsus,
Naples Archaeological Museum.